

INTERVIEW

Michael Green:

Why I oppose Donald Trump

Michael Green worked for President George W. Bush on the staff of the National Security Council (NSC) during 2001-05, eventually becoming special assistant to the president for national security affairs with responsibility for East Asia and South Asia. He was one of 50 former security officials in Republican administrations who signed a letter on August 8 saying that Donald Trump “lacks the character, values and experience” to be President and “would put at risk our country’s national security and well-being.” Then, on August 8, he was one of eight former Republican administration security officials dealing with Asia who went even further and endorsed Hillary Clinton.

Q: Why did you endorse Clinton?

Green: In a Clinton versus Trump contest there is no question who should win if you are a conservative internationalist—and I saw a protest vote for a third candidate as a cop-out. So I hope Clinton wins, but also that the Republicans keep the Senate to ensure sufficient defense spending and support for free trade, both of which are critical for our Asia policy.

During the primaries, I worked for Jeb Bush, and I briefed him on Asia. I was never going to vote for Trump, let alone work for him. I wrote op-eds saying why he was wrong on allies, in saying he would meet [North Korean dictator] Kim Jong-un, and in opposing TPP [the Trans Pacific Partnership trade agreement]. Like others in my position, I assumed that more moderate and reasonable leaders in the party, like [Senator] John McCain or [House Speaker] Paul Ryan, would eventually coax Trump into a more acceptable track.

I thought that, while I would never work inside his Administration, I’d be willing to advise the campaign, or his transition team if he won, on the importance of our alliances and trade. In fact, I was asked by very high-level government leaders in Asia to try to preserve that option. I was asked: “Just for the sake of alliances, don’t flee the Republican Party, because, if Trump wins, who is going to explain to his people how alliances and trade and American interests work in Asia?” I was not the only one who got such requests. The Japanese and Australians and Koreans tried, and failed, to find someone in the Trump camp they could

talk to. After Trump won the nomination, he doubled down on his reckless comments and demonstrated a complete narcissistic unwillingness to learn from anyone about any complex problem.

Traveling abroad for months really brought home how much damage Trump had already done to our credibility in Asia. So, [former State Department legal counsel] John Bellinger—along with people like [former US Ambassador to Iraq] John Negroponte and William Taft, Bellinger’s predecessor at State—began circulating a letter saying that Trump was dangerous and reckless and not going to change. The authors of that letter were not neo-conservatives; they were not the architects of the Iraq invasion. These were real no-drama, non-ideological professionals. The day the letter came out in the *New York Times*, there were two million hits on the website.

And now we have this new letter from Asia experts. I think there will be more of these coming out and I also expect some former Secretaries of State will speak out as well.

Q: I had thought that some of the latter would have already spoken out.

Green: There are a couple reasons for the delay. When you have most senior foreign policy and security affairs experts saying that a Presidential candidate is “reckless and dangerous,” that carries a lot of weight abroad. And should Trump win, that message is potentially dangerous. In the end, we decided he was doing so much damage that we had to warn the voters. For Condoleezza

Rice or Colin Powell to say “This man is dangerous,” has a much bigger impact abroad. Also, if they are going to speak up, I think it’s going to be in the fall, when more voters are paying attention and it will have more impact. What really tipped the balance for us was that week where he said he threatened to withdraw from the NATO alliance with Europe; where he engaged in that incredibly self-defeating and narcissistic Twitter fight with the parents of the Muslim-American soldier who was killed in combat in Iraq. This letter is unprecedented in American history.

Q: Is his basic problem that he has lousy ideas, or that he is, to put it bluntly, an ignorant person with a disturbed personality?

Green: All of our recent Presidents had some bad ideas, but they studied the world and they adjusted. The tipping point came when it was clear that Trump had a personality that was recklessly narcissistic and ignorant.

Every morning, Trump gets up, has his office Google his name and print out the top several dozen pages about him, and that’s what he reads. Then, he starts Tweeting and that’s his day. Despite his kids and his advisors saying “You have to study issues,” it’s very obvious he hasn’t made any effort. None of his so-called “advisors” have briefed him.

Q: So, how did such a man capture the nomination?

Green: Part of a frustration that Trump has tapped into is that our divided system of government cannot solve the complex problems we have right now to the satisfaction of a lot of Americans. I have relatives who are Trump supporters. They are not comfortable with the rapid social change they see in the country. Some are small business owners and Obamacare caused their healthcare costs to go up 30-40%. Then they voted in a Republican Congress that was completely unable to stop Obamacare.

However, it’s precisely that divided form of government that would prevent Trump from becoming a dictator. He has virtually no support for what he is saying about foreign policy in the Congress. Immigration is a bit different. So, if he were to win, he would be very boxed in. The ship of state would largely continue in the same direction. However, because he is the President of the United States, what he says, or how he reacts

to crises, will remain very dangerous.

Q: I looked at the President's legal power to do unilateral things on trade, and a President has quite a lot. So, I think he could do a tremendous amount of damage.

Green: On trade, the President has enormous authorities under Section 301 of US trade law, the National Security provisions, and so forth, to impose sanctions and do other things. But, at the end of the day, the Congress will pass laws and the Congress controls the budget. It would be chaos. But in the end, it would be very hard for him.

Q: All sorts of Americans traveling abroad, even tourists, keep getting asked by people in Japan, Europe and so forth: "How could this have happened in the first place?"

Green: It is unprecedented, and nobody really knows exactly why it happened. One narrative that seems compelling is that, "People are distressed because wages are flat for the middle class." But there is a lot of academic research and exit poll analysis that shows that economics are not the main reason people support Trump. So, it has to have an economic component, but that doesn't seem to be the whole story.

Another explanation is, "There has always been a level of nativism and even racism in American politics. And it's exploding now because of social change." But actually, illegal immigration is down the past few years. And so that doesn't fully explain it.

Obviously, things like the fracturing of media and the gerrymandering of election districts contribute because these factors allow people to only hear news that validates their ideological point of view.

People who resent the "elites" and "political correctness" and want to say things that are a little bit racist or misogynistic and want to blame others for their own failures find in Trump validation for their desire to speak in a manner that was considered too crude before Trump came along.

I went to Kenyon College in Ohio, which was a conservative kind of liberal arts college. And a lot of my classmates, who are doctors or small businessmen, were all for Trump three months ago, but now they are all walking away from him. Trump is losing support among college-educated white males. On the other hand, he still does fine with whites with less college education.

Q: Historically, when people are frustrated economically, "identity politics" around social issues like abortion or gay marriage or immigration or nationalism becomes very important. The average Trump voter in the primaries had a higher level of income than supporters of his rivals. But, among many of such people, there is the "fear of falling." Those who have something to lose hold on even tighter to their social identity and they blame "them" (Muslims, immigrants, African-Americans, etc.) for their threatened loss of status.

Green: I agree. The people I know in Ohio who are supporting Trump are quite successful. But they are also very anxious about their kids' ability to succeed or how to avoid "falling." These people are scared about their ability to hold onto their economic and

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This is not unique to the United States. The Brexit vote, a lot of what you are seeing in Europe, nationalism in Japan, Korea and China all similarly emanate from issues of identity and status anxiety. And in fact, the US is better conditioned to have a check against authoritarianism in our constitutional system than some of these other countries. But, given America's role in the world, it is uniquely consequential when this happens in the US.

One dimension ignored by the media is that Republican voters don't like losing. And they believe in American "exceptionalism," American strength and American leadership. Trump has told them that, "We are losers, but, under me, we are going to win again." That same frustration is what elected Ronald

Reagan and George W. Bush.

Q: Neither Reagan nor either Bush wanted to withdraw from the world, as Trump does. Trump almost seems like a throwback to the isolationism of 1930s-40s Republicans and the accusation of "treason" spouted by Senator Joe McCarthy in the early 1950s. This is not leadership; it's withdrawal.

Green: I agree. But my point is that there is a lot of the frustration with what Republicans and conservatives see as eight years of Barack Obama getting kicked around by the Chinese, by the North Koreans, the Iranians, and ISIS. The current frustration is not that different from that addressed by past Republican Presidents. But this time, the voters are pouring their frustration into a nativist, unilateralist, and reckless character.

Marco Rubio and Jeb Bush failed to captivate the public with the Reagan-like expression of American strength. Trump just knocked them off their game. The debates were decisive. Trump's whole career was based on a business model where you come out swinging and you just throw the other guy off by being unprincipled and crude. And that made him look stronger than Rubio or Bush.

So, if Trump loses, which seems likely, there is an opportunity for a new Republican leadership to try to capture that mood among the party's base. Trump is tapping into something that's very, very old in conservative and Republican circles in the US. And he is doing it in the most ugly and angry way, which is a sickness. But there is room for a kind of robust, muscular internationalism to find a good candidate. Trump sort of hijacked that mood.

The initial media attacks on Trump were not convincing to conservatives because they had been told by the *New York Times* and similar media outlets that, "Reagan is a B-movie actor," and that "Bush is a country bumpkin." That's why it will have an impact that Republican experts in the national security and foreign policy fields coming out and saying, "Take it from us, this guy is worse than just being a buffoon; he's dangerous." It is noteworthy that not a single national security official from previous Republican administrations has risen in his defense.

Q: Why, aside from former White House

chief economist Greg Mankiw, don't we see similar letters from prominent Republican economists?

Green: On the national security picture, especially on Asia, Hillary Clinton was quite an effective and good Secretary of State. Her views are not that different from Republicans on the Armed Services and Foreign Affairs Committees, especially on Asia. She made mistakes, but she demonstrated a competence and an instinct for American interests that is just completely missing from Trump. On the economic side, however, her proposals have moved to the left of where the mainstream Democratic Party used to be. Trump's economic policy is just completely unrealistic. But, a lot of people who have been signing the National Security letters are not joining the Clinton campaign, in part because she is opposing TPP. And you know, you'll notice that all of her advisors have gone silent regarding TPP.

Q: I've met a number of pro-TPP people who are convinced that Clinton secretly wants TPP to pass—in order to provide a counterweight to China—but she doesn't want to be blamed for it by her voter base. So, they contend that, during the “lame duck” session, she would very quietly signal to her Democratic allies in Congress not to oppose holding a lame duck vote to ratify TPP. I believe this is wishful thinking. What's your assessment?

Green: Initially, she tried to keep her options open. Then, when Trump won the nomination, she and her political advisors decided, “There is no halfway on this. You have to be for it or against it, and we have got to say she is against it.” So when you had people like the governor of Virginia, or senior foreign policy advisors around her speak out in favor of TPP, they were publicly or privately shut down.

What the policy advisors in the campaign say is: “She is going to do a complete review that will be very strategic and take into account the voices that want her to get TPP done.” It's completely unconvincing. Fortunately, she has not said she would “renegotiate” it. The many internationalists around her are holding out hope that she would get some changes via “side letters,” that don't require changing the approved text of the agreement itself. Frankly, Obama probably should have done some side letters to get this through Congress in the first place. The problem is: will she be able to

attract somebody good to be US Trade Representative (USTR) after this presidential campaign?

People around her say it'll be less than a year before she'll get around to reviewing TPP. There will be a lot of pressure on her from the Sanders people and other anti-TPP Democrats, especially if the Democrats retake the Senate.

Q: I imagine that her economic and political advisors would be almost forced to tell her not to spend her political capital on TPP. She will already come in as the least-liked President in modern history. So, why start off by doing something many of her supporters will see as a betrayal of a promise? While there are certainly benefits from an international reason to do TPP, its impact for good or ill on the US economy is minuscule. She would get much more political and economic benefit by, for example, fixing the problems of Obamacare.

Green: On the economy, you are right. However, in terms of foreign policy and strategy in Asia, not passing TPP would be a huge self-inflicted wound.

Q: That's the dilemma.

Green: And so a lot of her people privately think she'll turn to TPP right away. I think it's going to be a year or two. And it would be much, much better for her on TPP if the Republicans keep the Senate. She gets along well with the members of the Republican House and the Senate.

Q: My fear is that, merely by capturing the Republican nomination, he has done incredible damage to the Republican Party and to the mindset of tens of millions of Americans. This will have permanent effects on how politics works in the US even if, as seems likely, Trump will lose. It will further crimp America's willingness and ability to play the role of “benign hegemon” in the world. What's your view?

Green: It depends on the election outcome. The worst case scenario is that Trump wins. The best case scenario comes about if Trump just collapses. In the latter case, there would be some bruises to the political system, but also opportunities to restore confidence in the US. The Republican Senators, especially the new generation, are very internationalist. They are much more engaged on national security than their Democratic counterparts, one big exception being [Vice Presidential

candidate] Tim Kaine. Republican Governors are much more internationalist than Democrats. So I think there is a real base of leaders of internationalist leadership in the Republican Party.

What worries me more is if Trump loses, but it's close. In that case, he could start talking about “rigged elections” and fueling more and more resentment. And then he gives out all of these “dog whistles” about gun violence and race. That would be a legacy that would be incredibly damaging for the fabric of our society and our image abroad.

Q: Would it also send a message to Republicans in Congress who are worried about being defeated by even more conservative opponents in their primary elections?

Green: Yes, exactly. If Trump crumbles, then it's less of a concern.

We are going through a much larger transition in American politics. And it has to do with the postwar social safety net policies not keeping up with globalization, with aging, and with the atomization of our society because of technology. Trump is one particularly bad symptom of this transition.

In the short term, we are seeing, as some analysts put it, a Republican Party committing suicide. But, in the longer term, there are a lot of dynamic ideas for growth and dynamism in the economy coming out of the Congress and think-tanks that Trump has nothing to do with. By contrast, the Democratic Party doesn't have any new ideas. What you heard from the Democratic primary campaign was the two candidates trying to outdo each other in pandering to unions, and more public sector spending, and so on. These ideas are just not workable. So, even if Clinton wins, as expected, I still think the Democratic Party is going to have its own conflagration coming up.

In political science, we always look at both structural factors and the emergence of this or that individual personality. A lot of what is happening today is due to structural change. But I am a real believer in leadership, and I do think both parties will generate leaders as they have in the past, people like Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan, people who understand the spirit of the times, understand how to make the needed structural changes, and can capture an electoral mandate based on that. I am still optimistic that leadership will emerge. Sometimes it takes a decade or two, but such leaders do emerge.